The Fourth Church Pulpit

HOPES AND FEARS OF ALL THE YEARS

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John M. Buchanan

Christ is a little baby, a child. Part of the cycle of the Christian year is to marvel at the mystery of birth. The Christmas story sounds so purposive, too purposive really, as it is told year after year: How they went to pay taxes and ended up in a stable. There are no surprises. We see the scene so clearly in our mind's eye — as orderly as the creche set up on the table in the living room. Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, the friendly beasts, the angels, are each in place as if they all knew what was going on. But of course they did not know what was going on there in Bethlehem, any more than we know what is going on when God moves in our lives in small yet utterly decisive ways.

Diana Eck
Encountering God

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Scripture
Isaiah 35:1-7

"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees ...'Be strong, do not fear'..."
Isaiah 35:3,4 (NRSV)

On my short list of favorite Christmas music are two carols: a familiar one that has been one of my favorites for years and a recent entry.

The first one is "O Little Town of Bethlehem." It was my parents' favorite, and when on Christmas Eve we used to sit down and read the story, and pray the Christmas Eve family prayer I was given at Sunday School, we always sang "O Little Town of Bethlehem." The words are particularly meaningful and even though I discovered this year that Bethlehem is neither a little town, nor is it still, I continue to think that one of the best and most important affirmations about the birth of Jesus comes in the last line of the fist verse:

> "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

The most recent entry to my list of favorites is one of the old English carols in Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, "This Little Babe." It's by William Southwell, who lived at the end of the sixteenth century, a contemporary of William Shakespeare.

The words he wrote that I have come to love:

> "This little Babe so few days old,
> Is come to rifle satan's fold;
> All hell doth at his presence quake,
> Though he himself for cold do shake;..."

I love that image — all hell quaking at the presence of a shivering baby.

"O Little Town" and "This little Babe" remind me that in the midst of the Christmas festivities there are very big and very important issues at stake; issues of hope and fear, of the powers of evil and death and hell confronted by the reality of God or of all things a shivering baby.

That contrast, that major theme, runs through the season of Advent. But it takes commitment and determination to do it right. We resist in the Church celebrating the birth without dealing with those deeper issues. There is a seductive and lovely festival going on "out there," beyond these doors. It comes at just the right time of year, when the days are shortest, the dark nights longest, and most of us, having worked too long and too hard for three-and-one-half-months, are in need of anything that will bring grace and good cheer and light and hope into the daily round.

In fact, the festival has been going on for weeks, months even, just a few feet away. Lord and Taylor brings out the red carpet runners and bows before Halloween. The fantastic snow flakes in the Atrium of Water Tower Place soon followed. My favorite saxophonist, who can play "Misty" for eight consecutive hours, has made his annual repertoire adjustment and since Thanksgiving has been playing "Winter Wonderland" non stop, morning till night.

In here we're singing "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" and "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel," and the color in here is the same as Lent, purple, for penitence. The best line of the season came from a doctor at Northwestern who walked up to exchange greetings last Sunday and noticed that we have new purple paraments on the communion table, pulpit and lectern, in addition to all the purple bows and said "It was nice of you to do this for the Northwestern football team." (Particularly from an Ohio State fan, I thought to myself.)

There are big issues in the air at Christmas.

Somewhere just beneath the surface of all the celebrating are the hopes and fears of all the years.

Eight centuries before the birth, a poet of exquisite skill wrote about people who were discouraged, despairing, vulnerable and, most of all, afraid. Their tiny nation could not withstand the ferocious might and barbaric militarism of their neighbors, who had sworn to destroy them. Their life as a people, and as individuals, was at risk. One of their prophets, Isaiah, wrote:

> "The wilderness shall be glad,
> the desert shall blossom ...
> strengthen the weak hands
> and make firm the feeble knees.
> Say to the fearful
> Be strong, do not fear"

It is the theological high point in the history of Israel. God will come, the prophet promised, and everything will be different. Even nature will be changed, and for men and women, there will be real transformation. And furthermore, when God comes, there will be no reason to fear any longer.

Think about how frequently that word occurs in the Bible.

To Moses, preparing to lead the people out of Egypt — "Fear not. I will be with you."

To Israel, quaking before the might of Assyria and later in Babylonian exile — "Fear not. I will be with you."

To shepherds, tending their flocks — "Fear not. I bring good news for all people."

To frightened disciples at an open tomb — "Fear not. He is not here. He is risen."

Someone said that's the basic job of preaching, to say, week in and week out — "Fear not!"

And the reason is that fear is one of the most powerful dynamics which impinges on your life: your heart and soul and mind and body.

Methodist seminary president Leonard Sweet, a very thoughtful scholar, has written about it recently and concludes that "pervasive fear is the fundamental fact of life in the 1990s."

Sweet remembers learning the new four letter word "fear." He was in elementary school, in art class. He was doing poorly in art — and I can identify with that — and was ridiculed and he discovered the power of fear, uncertainty and doubt. "I learned that there were such things as bad drawings and dumb questions." He also learned the paralyzing fear of failure.

In a helpful essay Sweet points out how important fear has become. Fear is a major motivator and market force. Fear sells car alarms and security systems. Fear drives population shifts, the Serbs from Sarajevo, whites from South Africa, frightened parents from the City to the suburbs. [See *Sweet's Soul Cafe*, Vol. 1, November 6-7, 1995]

Fear is part of the crisis in education. Rush Limbaugh preaches fear of the government. Extremists spout fear of racial minorities and immigrants and the radical right spouts fear of a United Nations invasion of the American Northwest directed by a cabal of international bankers - translate that "Jews."

In her very thoughtful book *Democracy on Trial* University of Chicago sociologist Jean Bethke Elshtain discusses the "fear of crime syndrome. The fear of crime syndrome" she says, "has a debilitating effect on women. In 1991, half of the 250 American movies made for television depicted women undergoing abuse of one kind or another." Elshtain thinks that "by portraying women as trembling wrecks or fierce avengers, women and feminism are ill served." [p. 52]

Professor Elshtain contends "We are more fearful than hopeful."

Now I am not advocating irresponsibility, unnecessary risks. Please lock your car doors, don't go out alone, exercise common sense, learn basic survival skills for the city, watch your purse and wallet, even in church.

But when we live out of fear, one of two things happens. Either we become paralyzed, or we try to eliminate our fear by putting our confidence in the wrong place and we start to make bad decisions.

The gun lobby won't tell you this, but the police will; one of the most dangerous things you can do is buy a hand gun to allay your fear of violent crime. Every week it seems, maybe even every day, people shoot and kill their children, spouses, neighbors: last Wednesday it was Samuel Walker in Texas who shot his 16-year-old step-daughter hiding in her closet. The week before a man in Houston shot his 15-year-old daughter. Fear breeds bad decisions.

The philosophers and theologians know about a deeper, primal fear, what Paul Tillich called "ontological fear" — the fear of non-being. It takes the form of fear of aging, debilitating illness, fear of death, nothingness; fear that the world will go its merry way without us. One of my very favorite *Peanuts* cartoons had Charlie Brown wringing his hands, worrying, fussing, telling all the things that were wrong with his life, all his fears, all the terrible things that were bound to happen. "I wish I had never been born" he exclaims, to which Linus responds, innocently, "why the theological implications of that are enormous."

Fear breeds bad decisions. Fear also paralyzes. Fear of failing prevents us from trying, applying for the job or the scholarship or admission to graduate school. Fear of failing, looking foolish, prevents us from drawing a picture, singing a song, writing a poem. Fear of failure prevents us from saying "will you marry me, will you be with me." Fear of seeming foolish or vulnerable prevents us from saying "I love you, you mean everything to me, I need you."

Fear of aging prevents us from enjoying being who we are now, and fear of dying can paralyze us emotionally, spiritually and prevent us from living.

> "Strengthen the weak hands,
> and make firm the feeble knees,
> Say to the fearful,
> Fear not."

Courage in the Bible is often the product of faith. But courage is not the absence of fear. It is the ability to act, to live fully in spite of fear.

When he returned to work after very extensive surgery for the malignancy that threatened his life, Joseph Cardinal Bernadin was asked by a *Chicago Sun-Times* reporter:

"What fear would you have? You're confident there is a heaven. Someone in your capacity must be almost looking forward to seeing God, being embraced by Christ."

Cardinal Bernadin, leader of the Archdiocese of Chicago and good friend of Fourth Church, responded with humanity and integrity and faith: "It's true" he said, referring to his confidence and his looking forward to seeing God. "But you don't shed completely your emotions as a human being. There's no contradiction between having fear or being emotionally distraught at times and at the same time being a person of faith. I know we're on the road to something better. But to say you have no fear, no anxiety, I think that would be somewhat abnormal." [*Chicago Sun-Times*, 9/5/95]

Sadly, for many people the deepest fear of all is the fear of God. It grows out of a sense of personal inadequacy or sin, a sense that if we should meet God it will not be an altogether positive experience for us. It grows out of a sense, often the very heart of institutional religion, that God is an angry parent, a vengeful judge, whose wrath is great and punishment is sure. Sometimes, at the very bottom of our fear is the remnant of a theology that views God as unfriendly, maybe even hostile.

And that, all of that, all our fears, is what is met in the streets of Bethlehem. God comes, not as judge, not as punishing tyrant, but as a child. God's love, God's understanding, God's acceptance, God's grace, God's humility, God's vulnerability, God's gift, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

> "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees, ...
> 'Be Strong, do not fear' ... "

Or as Mister Southwell put it with charm and wit:

> "My soul, with Christ join thou in fight; ...
> This little Babe will be thy guard.
> If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,
> Then flit not from this heavenly Boy."

Amen.